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## A Historiographical Look Into the Origins of Jazz

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# A Historiographical Look Into the Origins of Jazz

## **Writing Process**

Historiography handles the way that historians' writings on a given topic has changed over time. My paper, on the origins of jazz music in the United States, takes a particular look at 8 historians, works ranging from 1946 to 2001, and evaluates their arguments. I ultimately make the case for one particular historian as having the best and most comprehensive discussion on the topic.

## **Course**

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### A Historiographical Look into the Origins of Jazz

The emergence of jazz in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century has widely been seen as a cultural phenomenon, some historians going so far as to call it a musical revolution. Ever since they first began looking into the emergence and development of jazz in the United States, there has been disagreement regarding its origins. The degree to which the relationship between races played a role in its development, the extent of African influence, and the impact of ragtime and blues are just some aspects that historians have been debating since the music first gained its popular foothold in American culture and art. While there are a few factors that have gained historical consensus—such as the idea that New Orleans was vital to the development of early jazz music—the topics related to its origins are frequently disputed due to the fact that there is almost no written or recorded evidence that irrefutably outlines the ancestry of it. It is only through analyses such as the ones presented by Gunther Schuller, taking in all three factors—racial interrelations, African influence, and ragtime and blues—and looking at early jazz music with close detail, that the origins of jazz are most clearly examined and defined.

In his book published in 1988, *The Reception of Jazz in America: A New View*, James Lincoln Collier only discusses one aspect of jazz's predevelopment: the role of race relations. Collier presents the argument that historians have overstated the level of segregation present in the city of New Orleans in late nineteenth to early twentieth century. He attempts to back this argument with a brief discussion centered on what he calls "black-and-tan dance halls" (Collier

3), and also states that it was common for black performers at the time to be playing music for white audiences. These two main points of interaction, Collier claims, demonstrates that the music industry was not as segregated as other historians have attempted to argue. Collier's position, however, seems to disregard the Jim Crow segregation that was present in the city, causing socioeconomic divides that did not disappear even in integrated places like "black-and-tan dance halls". In addition, Collier neglects to mention the influence of West African music, or lack thereof, as well as the extent ragtime and blues should be considered as a precursor to jazz music.

Eileen Southern also discusses how race relations affected the emergence of jazz, and identifies ragtime and blues as antecedents. In *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, published in 1971, Southern argues that racial interaction resulted in a geodemographic shift that allowed for and helped to formulate jazz's conception. She explains how Jim Crow segregation in the late nineteenth century pushed Creoles geographically closer to blacks in New Orleans, which led to further cultural and musical integration between the two demographic groups. This musical integration eventually led to the evolution of jazz in the Louisiana Delta. In her discussion of ragtime and blues, Southern draws attention to slavery and the resulting separate communities of black Americans that remained even after Emancipation and the Civil War. Within these distinct communities, there arose a desire to express personal needs and individuality as a separate entity from whites, and Southern identifies ragtime and blues as the first musical movements intended to help fulfill this. She describes ragtime as having roots in black folk music, and how it became more known to whites through minstrel shows. Southern also takes a look at blues, citing the impact of mournful songs, spirituals, and call-and-response styles as tributaries to blues music. Southern explains that as brass bands and orchestras began to

incorporate the ragtime and blues styles into their music, jazz started to take on a more distinct shape in America leading up to its boom in popularity. Although Southern goes into a more concrete explanation of the segregation occurring in the industry than Collier, and also includes a discussion of the influential roles that ragtime and blues music played in its conception, Southern still neglects to discuss the distinctly African influences present in jazz. Although the extent of the influence African music had on jazz's development is a debated topic, a general lack of representation of any pertinent argument causes Southern's discussion of the origins of jazz to feel incomplete.

Marshall Stearns also discusses only two aspects regarding the origins of jazz in his book, which was published in 1956 near the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. In *The Story of Jazz*, Stearns's argument focuses on the evolution of jazz as a blending of several cultural components in New Orleans, particularly those of African culture with the dominant European culture in the United States. Stearns focuses primarily on the influence of West African music and culture as a precursor to jazz, emphasizing their similarities in rhythms and arguing that the distinct nature of rhythms presented in jazz is a simplification of those found in the music of West Africa. Stearns also briefly touches on blues music by identifying how African American music centered on the idea of blues tonality, which Stearns describes as unique treatment—"an endless variety of swoops, glides, slurs, smears, and glisses" (Stearns 7)—of the third and seventh of the chord. The blues tonality is not, Stearns maintains, something derived from European music. He also discusses falsetto breaks, call-and-response songs, songs of allusion, and African dance as elements of West African music and culture that survived through jazz music. Though Stearns details a more specific, closer analysis of the music of jazz itself as it relates to its predecessors of African music and blues, Stearns' discussion of blues is brief.

Additionally, he does not identify ragtime as significant in the prehistory of jazz music, and neglects to discuss the impact racial interaction had on the music industry and culture through which jazz emerged.

Ted Gioia takes a similar view to Stearns regarding the African influence on the conception of jazz and its development into a distinct musical style. In *The History of Jazz*, published in 1997, he argues an emphasis on West African music as a predecessor of jazz, focusing on the musical similarities between the two. Gioia discusses the African dances that occurred in the Congo Square in New Orleans during the late nineteenth century, and explains that they closely coincide with the emergence of jazz bands in the city. Gioia draws particular attention to the importance of this correlation by discussing how memories of the dances and other African rituals in the Louisiana city helped to shape the self-identity of many early jazz pioneers. He also argues that ragtime was as important as blues, if not more so, to the development and emergence of jazz. Gioia backs this argument with the claim that the terms “ragtime” and “jazz” were often used interchangeably during jazz’s early stages of development before it took on a more distinct musical nature in and of itself. Throughout his argument, Gioia takes a look at some of the results of race relations, though he never discusses the cause of those results outright. One such example of this is in his discussion of the impact of minstrel music, describing how it became a black interpretation of a “white caricature” of African American music (Gioia 8), but he does not directly discuss the racism or segregation that was prevalent at the time. Though Gioia briefly touches on the three biggest contributors to the emergence of jazz, his lack of direct discussion or analysis of the impact of interracial interaction during the formative years, particularly around the end of the nineteenth century, leaves his discussion and argument inadequately supported.

Alyn Shipton also emphasizes some key points regarding the emergence of jazz over other factors. In his 2001 book, *A New History of Jazz*, Shipton seeks to dispute the idea that the evolution of jazz was a revolutionary movement, and instead identifies it as a more gradual blending of different influences that nonetheless gave birth to the new musical form. Shipton explains that while many historians emphasize the African roots commonly associated with jazz's origins, he focuses instead on what he calls the "symbiotic relationship" (Shipton 23) that was unfolding in New Orleans: Creoles that were attempting to Europeanize their culture, and the African Americans living uptown that were conversely clinging to their African heritage. Shipton also disputes the argument presented by many historians that the call-and-response style in jazz has roots in African music, counter-arguing that they are more closely related to the working class than distinctly African. Shipton also discusses the impact of ragtime, calling it an archetype for jazz and discussing how ragtime's development helped to pave social and organizational highways that allowed for jazz to be successful as a musical style. However, Shipton disagrees with the contention historians have made regarding a closely linked relationship between blues and jazz; he explains that the two are not "joined at the hip" (Shipton 40) but rather that the historical perspectives of blues has no real unanimity. Shipton presents the claim that the two existed independently of one another, although they share a similar 12 measure sequence and performance style. He also briefly discusses how the social and cultural diversity and racial interrelations unfolding in New Orleans during the years preceding jazz's conception made it the perfect breeding ground for the elements of jazz to combine into a distinct style of music. Though much of Shipton's arguments center on refuting commonly accepted notions regarding jazz—such as the call-and-response aspect deriving from African music—his

discussion of race relations is limited in scope. Shipton discusses his counterarguments with relative depth, but his brief mention of the racial dynamic necessitates the same attention.

Rudi Blesh, in *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*, argues that indecision and ambiguity regarding race relations in New Orleans led to the eventual emergence of jazz as a distinct blend of differing musical styles. He explains that a lack of clarity regarding how whites and blacks should interact allowed for many African Americans to continue their African music and culture, which was distinct from that of the European nature of white Americans at the time. This discussion of African influence is vague and limited, and his description of race relations seems to discount any mention of segregation and Jim Crow laws, potentially attributable to the fact that the book was published in the mid-1940s, when Jim Crow laws were still in effect before the Civil Rights movement that would start a few years later. Additionally, this mention of African Americans holding to their African heritage is the most Blesh discusses on the idea of African music as a precursor for jazz. He identifies ragtime and blues as deviations from what he calls “archaic jazz”—or the jazz that was played mostly in parades and funerals before it gained popularity (Blesh 156). Blesh explains that both blues and ragtime became a well-known part of jazz. He presents the argument that blues and jazz are not separate, but rather have blended together, and that ragtime came from minstrel music.

Burton W. Peretti, similar to Blesh, discusses all three precursors to jazz as well as the role race relations played in jazz’s conception and early development. In *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America*, published in 1992, Peretti contends that the evolution of ragtime, blues, and jazz was perhaps inevitable (Peretti 15), given the changes that were occurring in black communities following Emancipation and the enactment of the Jim Crow laws that resulted in near total segregation. Peretti focuses on how extreme racism and



segregation—between blacks and whites and also between blacks and Creoles—as well as issues such as unemployment impacted the lives of jazz pioneers and the culture from which the music emerged and came to partially represent. Peretti takes a close look at how jazz became more widely accepted between socioeconomic classes in the black community as it blended African and European musicality, rural and urban culture, as well as Creole and Protestant culture. Peretti also discusses blues and the influence of African music by explaining how “country blues” shows strong integration with West African musical tendencies, particularly as it relates to African American music, dance, and spirituality. Peretti argues that blues and jazz are “cousins” (Peretti 16) due to their similarities in geographical distribution, origins, harmonic patterns, and other musical characteristics. Peretti offers an in-depth, well-articulated presentation of the factors involved in the origins of jazz as a distinct musical style, discussing race relations, African influence, as well as ragtime and blues. Though his discussion could offer a deeper analysis of ragtime’s influence, Peretti’s central arguments and discussion are well-founded and adequately inclusive.

Gunther Schuller, in *Early Jazz: It’s Roots and Musical Development*, which was published in 1968, provides a comprehensive discussion of the origins of jazz. He discusses the impact of race relations, the deeply entrenched African roots, as well as ragtime and blues. Schuller describes the emergence of jazz as the nadir in African American musical history due to the extreme segregation of the industry at the time, as a result of Jim Crow laws that had gone into effect during the early stages of its development. As a result, Schuller identifies jazz as a depiction of social change in the United States. He also discusses at length and using precise detail the precursors to the musical form itself, particularly African influences, blues, and ragtime. He concludes that many specific musical tendencies of jazz can be derived from African

influence: syncopation, the layering of multiple rhythm patterns, feeling the music in eighth notes as opposed the European style of quarter notes, call-and-response forms, repeated refrains, improvisation, and many more. Schuller discusses all of these with specific musical examples by including pieces of sheet music which he closely analyzes in regards to rhythm and harmonic patterns to help to illustrate his point. He even identifies African influence within ragtime and blues. In his discussion of them as predecessors of jazz, he takes an almost compare-and-contrast approach, though he identifies both as important in their role towards the conception of jazz. He found ragtime and blues to be a mix of African and European music, but found differences regarding tempo and form. Schuller's central argument, however, is summed up when he says: "the analytic study in this chapter shows that *every* musical element—rhythm, harmony, melody, timbre, and the basic forms of jazz—is essentially African in background and derivation" (Schuller 62).

Schuller's thorough and detailed analysis of the relationship shared between African roots, blues, and ragtime, as well as his incorporation of the role that the racial dynamic played in the music industry and culture during the time of its emergence, presents the most convincing and well-founded argument for his discussion regarding the origins of jazz music. By incorporating very specific examples, such as the multiple presentations of sheet music of certain songs, and analyzing them with exhaustive detail, it is clear to see that Schuller's presentation is founded in concrete examinations that lead to conclusions grounded in more than general, theoretical connections. Collier's exclusive focus on race makes his discussion related to the origins of jazz grossly incomplete, and while historians such as Southern, Shipton, Gioia, and Stearns incorporate—to varying degrees and combinations—two of the fundamental aspects to jazz's origins, a discussion of all three is vital for a full, rounded argument on the topic. Though

both Blesh and Peretti are careful to include all three of the major topics regarding jazz's origins, the close analysis Schuller produces sets his arguments above the other two and helps him present the clearest, most comprehensive case for the extent that race, African influence, and the impact of ragtime and blues had on jazz's emergence as a distinct musical form.

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